

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 TEL AV 03611 231044Z
ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----231053Z 003734 /20

O R 230924Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6272
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

S E C R E T TEL AVIV 3611

EXDIS

FOR THE PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY VANCE

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, IS
SUBJECT: MENAHEM BEGIN -- MOSES OR SAMSON?

1. I HAD A FORTUITOUS CHANCE TO MEET AND SIZE UP BEGIN SUNDAY AT AN INFORMAL LUNCH IN HOME OF OUR PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER WITH NO ONE ELSE PRESENT. WE SPENT ALMOST THREE HOURS IN CONVERSATION ABOUT OUR RESPECTIVE LIVES (HIS WAS CERTAINLY MORE INTERESTING*), CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION AND PRESPECTS, HISTORY OF ISRAEL AND OF JEWISH PEOPLE, AND NATURE OF TIES BETWEEN OUR TWO NATIONS. HE WAS WARM AND EFFUSIVELY FIRENDLY--ANXIOUS TO REASSURE ME OF HIS DEDICATION TO PEACE AND TO MAINTENANCE OF CLOSEST POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP TO U.S. HE SEEMED WELL RECOVERED FROM THE RECENT HEART ATTACK AND PNEUMONIA, IF A BIT TIRED.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 TEL AV 03611 231044Z

2. WE ARE REPORTING SEPARATELY HIS REMARKS ABOUT FUTURE CABINET PROSPECTS AND THE PROCESS OF COALITION-BUILDING. BEGIN EXUDES CONFIDENCE THAT HIS GOVERNMENT WILL BE IN PLACE BY LATE JUNE AND THAT HE COULD COME TO WASHINGTON BY FIRST WEEK OF JULY.

3. BY THIS TIME YOU HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY BEEN GIVEN AMPLE

ANALYSIS OF BEGIN'S BACKGROUND, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC VIEWS. HOWEVER, RECALLING MY OWN BRIEFINGS IN WASHINGTON, AND TREATMENT HE IS USUALLY ACCORDED BY PRESS AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORIANS, I FOUND MY PRECONCEPTIONS KNOCKED SLIGHTLY ASKEW.

4. AN IDEOLOGUE? YES, UNDOUBTEDLY; IN THAT HE PLANTS HIS POLITICAL VIEWS DEEP IN THE SOIL OF JEWISH HISTORY AND NATIONAL "DESTINY." YET HE TAKES GREAT PRIDE IN WHAT HE SAYS IS HIS DEMONSTRATED TALENT FOR MOSDING SHARPLY DIVERSE VIEWS INTO A COHERENT TEAM EFFORT (OTHER ISRAELIS THINK OF HIM AS A "LONER"). HE SEES HIMSELF AS A POLITICIAN, NOT AN EVANGELIST. HE REGARDS LIKUD'S VICTORY AS THE END OF A PROTRACTED POLITICAL STRUGGLE WITH BEN GURION'S LABOR/SOCIALIST PARTY WHICH BEGAN IN THE 1930'S; A STRUGGLE INTENSELY IDEOLOGICAL, BUT GENUINELY POLITICAL AS WELL--AND ALWAYS CONDUCTED ACCORDING TO DEMOCRATIC RULES.

5. THE KNESSET--ITS TRADITIONS, CURRENT SHORTCOMINGS, AND POTENTIAL PREOCCUPY HIM. HIS OLD ADVERSARIES, THE BRITISH, PROVIDE HIS MODEL FOR HOW A PROPER PARLIAMENT SHOULD FUNCTION. SOME OF HIS MOST SCATHING CRITUQUES ARE OF THE WAY LABOR GOVERNMENTS HAVE IGNORED THE KNESSET; HE HAS SEVERAL SCHEMES FOR BREATHING LIFE INTO ITS POTENTIAL FOR OVERSEEING AND BALANCING THE POWERS OF THE CABINET AND BUREAUCRACY. HE AIMS TO BE LAW GIVER, NOT ONLY CHIEF EXECUTIVE.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 TEL AV 03611 231044Z

6. BEGIN TALKS MOVINGLY OF THE TRAGEDIES IN HIS LIFE, OF THE STRUGGLES WHICH HAVE TOUGHENED HIS CHARACTER AND HAVE NOW PREPARED HIM TO LEAD HIS NATION. WITHOUT TWO YEARS IN A SUB-ARCTIC RUSSIAN WORK CAMP HE COULD NOT HAVE BECOME STRONG ENOUGH TO LEAD THE IRGUN UNDERGROUND ARMY. AND HE IS ANYTHING BUT ASHAMED OF HIS IRGUN PERIOD. HE TAKES QUIET PRIDE IN WHAT HE CHARACTERIZES AS THE "MOST HUMANE GUERILLA WAR FOUGHT AGAINST THE BRITISH IN ANY OF THE COLONIAL REGIONS." AND WITHOUT THAT WAR, HE BELIEVES THAT ISRAEL WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN BORN; NOR WOULD THE JEWS OF PALESTINE HAVE SURVIVED UNDER THE RULE OF THE ARABS.

7. URBANE AND SCHOLARLY IN DEMEANOR, BEGIN SEEMS TO ADMIRE MOST SOME OF THE OLD FASHIONED VIRTURS: HONOR, TRUTH, HARD WORK, INTELLIGENCE, FIDELITY, AND GENTILITY AMID POLITICAL CONFLICT. GOOD MANNERS COUNT WITH BEGIN. HE IS NOT A TRICKY MAN.

8. HIS RELIGIOUS FAITH IS CENTRAL TO HIS CHARACTER. HE INSISTS IT CAN NEVER BE IMPOSED, BUT MUST BE BETTER TAUGHT.

9. I BELIEVE HIM WHEN HE SAYS NO ONE YEARNS FOR PEACE MORE THAN HE. HE IS NOT A MAN ON HORSEBACK. I ALSO SENSE HE MIGHT YIELD MORE FOR TRUE PEACE WITH THE ARABS THAN WE SUSPECT. BUT NEVER FOR "PROMISES OR ILLUSIONS." HE BELIEVES THAT A LESS AMBIGUOUS ISRAELI POLICY MAY INDUCE THE ARAB LEADERS FINALLY TO ACCEPT ISRAEL'S INEVITABILITY, AND IMPREGNABILITY. HE DID NOT USE THE PHRASE BUT I WAS REMINDED AS I LISTENED OF THE CONCEPT OF "MASSIVE DETERRENCE."

10. CALM, QUIET, SELF-CONFIDENCE, NOT EUPHORIA, BEST SUMS UP HIS MOOD. HE DOES NOT IGNORE THE DANGERS AHEAD, BUT IS CONVINCED THAT PAST LABOR
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 04 TEL AV 03611 231044Z

GOVERNMENTS WERE LEADING ISREAL TOWARD BOTH DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL DISASTER, AND THAT HE AND THE LIKUD WILL SET THE COMPASS STRAIGHT. HE COUNTS ON THE UNITED STATES TO STAND BY ISRAEL, AND IS SURE THAT ONCE WE KNOW HIM BETTER WE WILL ACCEPT MANY OF HIS VIEWS. HE WILL NOT CHANGE THEM EASILY, FOR HE SEES HISTORY AS HAVING PROVED HIM RIGHT. HE IS EAGER TO MEET PRESIDENT CARTER. IT PROMISES TO BE QUIET A MEETING.
LEWIS

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NNN

Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PERSONAL OPINION, PRIME MINISTER
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 23-May-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 22 May 2009
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977TELAV03611
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770183-0014
Format: TEL
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770526/aaaaawru.tel
Line Count: 148
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 1d9dbf8b-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 03-Feb-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2400615
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: MENAHEM BEGIN -- MOSES OR SAMSON?
TAGS: PFOR, IS, (LEWIS, SAMUEL W), (BEGIN, MENAHEM)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/1d9dbf8b-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009